

## ASSYRIAN AND PERSIAN ORNAMENT.

RICH as has been the harvest gathered by Mons. Botta and Mr. Layard from the ruins of Assyrian Palaces, the monuments which they have made known to us do not appear to carry us back to any remote period of Assyrian Art. Like the monuments of Egypt, those hitherto discovered belong to a period of decline, and of a decline much farther removed from a culminating point of perfection. The Assyrian must have



Egyptian.



Assyrian.

declined from the time of the Pharaohs to that of the Greeks and Romans; the forms, which were at first flowing and graceful, became coarse and abrupt; the swelling of the limbs, which was at first

either been a borrowed style, or the remains of a more perfect form of art have yet to be discovered. We are strongly inclined to believe that the Assyrian is not an original style, but was borrowed from the Egyptian, modified by the difference of the religion and habits of the Assyrian people.

On comparing the bas-reliefs of Nineveh with those of Egypt we cannot but be struck with the many points of resemblance in the two styles; not only is the same mode of representation adopted, but the objects represented are oftentimes so similar, that it is difficult to believe that the same style could have been arrived at by two people independently of each other.

The mode of representing a river, a tree, a besieged city, a group of prisoners, a battle, a king in his chariot, are almost identical,—the differences which exist are only those which would result from the representation of the habits of two different people; the art appears to us to be the same. Assyrian sculpture seems to be a development of the Egyptian, but, instead of being carried forward, descending in the scale of perfection, bearing the same relation to the Egyptian as the Roman does to the Greek. Egyptian sculpture gradually

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rather indicated than expressed, became at last exaggerated; the conventional was abandoned for an imperfect attempt at the natural. In Assyrian sculpture this attempt was carried still farther, and while the general arrangement of the subject and the *pose* of the single figure were still conventional, an attempt was made to express the muscles of the limbs and the rotundity of the flesh; in all art this is a symptom of decline, Nature should be idealised not copied. Many modern statues differ in the same way from the Venus de Milo, as do the bas-reliefs of the Ptolemies from those of the Pharaohs.

Assyrian Ornament, we think, presents also the same aspect of a borrowed style and one in a state of decline. It is true that, as yet, we are but imperfectly acquainted with it; the portions of the Palaces, which would contain the most ornament, the upper portions of the walls and the ceilings, having been, from the nature of the construction of Assyrian edifices, destroyed. There can be little doubt, however, that there was as much ornament employed in the Assyrian monuments as in the Egyptian: in both styles there is a total absence of plain surfaces on the walls, which are either covered with subjects or with writing, and in situations where these would have been inapplicable, pure ornament must have been employed to sustain the general effect. What we possess is gathered from the dresses on the figures of the bas-reliefs, some few fragments of painted bricks, some objects of bronze, and the representations of the sacred trees in the bas-reliefs. As yet we have had no remains of their constructive ornament, the columns and other means of support, which would have been so decorated, being everywhere destroyed; the constructive ornaments which we have given in Plate XIV., from Persepolis, being evidently of a much later date, and subject to other influences, would be very unsafe guides in any attempt to restore the constructive ornament of the Assyrian Palaces.

Assyrian ornament, though not based on the same types as the Egyptian, is represented in the same way. In both styles the ornaments in relief, as well as those painted, are in the nature of diagrams. There is but little surface-modelling, which was the peculiar invention of the Greeks, who retained it within its true limits, but the Romans carried it to great excess, till at last all breadth of effect was destroyed. The Byzantines returned again to moderate relief, the Arabs reduced the relief still farther, while with the Moors a modelled surface became extremely rare. In the other direction, the Romanesque is distinguished in the same way from the Early Gothic, which is itself much broader in effect than the later Gothic, where the surface at last became so laboured that all repose was destroyed.

With the exception of the pine-apple on the sacred trees, Plate XII., and in the painted ornaments, and a species of lotus, Nos. 4 and 5, the ornaments do not appear to be formed on any natural type, which still farther strengthens the idea that the Assyrian is not an original style. The natural laws of radiation and tangential curvature, which we find in Egyptian ornament, are equally observed here, but much less truly,—rather, as it were, traditionally than instinctively. Nature is not followed so closely as by the Egyptians, nor so exquisitely conventionalised as by the Greeks. Nos. 2 and 3, Plate XIII., are generally supposed to be the types from which the Greeks derived some of their painted ornaments, but how inferior they are to the Greek in purity of form and in the distribution of the masses!



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